R E P O R T R E S U M E S

ED 012 924 AL 000 640

LANGUAGE, ETHNIC IDENTITY AND SOCIAL CHANGE IN SOUTHERN NIGERIA.

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PUB DATE JAN 67

EDRS PRICE MF-$0.25 HC-$0.40 10P.

DESCRIPTORS- *SOCIOLINGUISTICS, *AFRICAN LANGUAGES, AREA STUDIES, MODERN HISTORY, BILINGUALISM, MINORITY GROUPS, SECOND LANGUAGES, ETHNIC GROUPS, CULTURAL AWARENESS, POLITICAL DIVISIONS (GEOGRAPHIC), OGBIA, KALABARI, IJO, NEMBE, ODUAL, NIGERIA, SOUTHERN NIGERIA, ABUA,

THE INHABITANTS OF THE OIL RIVERS OR RIVERS SECTION OF SOUTHERN NIGERIA ARE DIVIDED BY HISTORY, GEOGRAPHY, AND LANGUAGE INTO TWO GROUPS--THE COASTAL PEOPLES AND THE HINTERLAND PEOPLES. COASTAL DIALECTS BELONG TO THE IJO GROUP OF LANGUAGES WHILE THE HINTERLAND DIALECTS ARE OF ANOTHER LANGUAGE FAMILY. DURING THE 19TH CENTURY THE HINTERLAND PEOPLES WERE POLITICALLY AND ECONOMICALLY DOMINATED BY THE COASTAL PEOPLE AND THE LANGUAGES SPOKEN BY THE VARIOUS GROUPS DEMONSTRATED (1) A HIGH INCIDENCE OF BILINGUALISM IN THE HINTERLAND NOT PARALLELED BY SIMILAR BILINGUALISM ON THE COAST, (2) A HIGH INCIDENCE OF COASTAL PERSONAL AND PLACE NAMES IN THE HINTERLAND, AND (3) THE FREQUENT USE OF COASTAL LANGUAGES IN EVERYDAY AFFAIRS IN HINTERLAND COMMUNITIES. THE CESSATION OF THE OIL RIVERS TRADE, THE COLONIAL REGIME, AND NIGERIAN NATIONALISM AND INDEPENDENCE HAVE CAUSED NOT ONLY SOCIAL-ECONOMIC CHANGES BUT LINGUISTIC CHANGES AS WELL. A GROWING SENSE OF ETHNIC IDENTITY AMONG THE MINORITY HINTERLAND GROUPS IS SEEN IN A SHIFT AWAY FROM USE OF COASTAL DIALECTS AS SECOND LANGUAGES AND A CONSCIOUS DESIRE TO REPLACE "FOREIGN" USAGE WITH THE VERNACULAR. THE CHANGE IN THE LANGUAGE SITUATION, THEN, ILLUSTRATES THE SOCIAL-ECONOMIC TREND AWAY FROM NATIONAL AND REGIONAL UNITY TOWARD DIVERSITY AND PARTICULARISM. THIS ARTICLE APPEARED IN "ANTHROPOLOGICAL LINGUISTICS," VOL. 9, NO. 1, JAN. 1967. (JD)

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LANGUAGE, ETHNIC IDENTITY AND SOCIAL CHANGE IN SOUTHERN NIGERIA*

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ED012924

This paper describes certain changes in inter-ethnic relationships in a minority area of southern Nigeria and concomitant changes in linguistic behavior. The evidence presented shows that inter-ethnic or inter-societal relationships have linguistic correlates and suggests, therefore, that certain features of linguistic behavior may serve as an index of the status of these relationships.

The geographic area under discussion is a part of the eastern Niger Delta, a section of what, in the 19th century, was known as the Oil Rivers and under colonial rule became Rivers Province of Nigeria. Though it was recently split into several provinces, the area is still popularly known as 'Rivers', and the inhabitants like to refer to themselves as 'Rivers people'. They are members of several numerically rather small ethnic groups which, for purposes of this discussion, may be divided into coastal and hinterland peoples. The coastal peoples discussed here are, from East to West, Kalabari and Nembe. The hinterland groups, also from East to West, are Abua, Odual and Ogbia. The geographic distribution is such that Abua and Odual are Kalabari hinterland, while Ogbia, both Kolo Creek and western subgroups, lie inland from Nembe territory. In the present context, 'hinterland' is more than a merely geographic designation. During the 19th century the coastal peoples controlled the palm oil trade with European trading firms. Since the oil palm does not grow in the coastal areas, each trading state maintained spheres of influence among the hinterland peoples who thus became producers and/or suppliers to one particular coastal state. The relationship was one of economic interdependence, but the coastal peoples were politically dominant, since they were able (1) to prevent Europeans from making direct contact with the suppliers and (2) to keep the latter from delivering oil to rival states. Under this arrangement Abua and Odual supplied palm products to Kalabari, Ogbia to Nembe.

In modern times the processing and shipping of palm products no longer follow the pattern established in the 19th century. Nevertheless, some food stuffs grown in the hinterland are now traded to the coast, and some fish caught by the coastal peoples is sold in the hinterland. The former political dominance of the coast is a thing of the past, but since the coastal peoples are numerically stronger, they are still able to exercise greater political influence than the hinterland groups.[1]

The following is a brief survey of languages spoken in this area. Kalabari and Nembe speak closely related dialects of the Ijo group of languages.

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The hinterland peoples speak fairly closely related dialects belonging to another language group. Actually, there is some overlapping of ethnic and linguistic boundaries in the hinterland. Thus, Abua and Odual may be said to speak divergent dialects of the same language, but mutual intelligibility is less than satisfactory. The ethnic designation 'Odual' hides the fact that one group of four villages — known to the outside world as Kugbo — speaks a language different from, though closely related to, Odual. Moreover, the eastern dialects of Ogbia are mutually intelligible with Kugbo but mutually unintelligible with western Ogbia dialects. Nevertheless, it is possible to identify three distinct but closely related languages for the hinterland groups. Though these people are aware of their close linguistic relationship and even acknowledge the probability of a common origin, there is not too much contact between them, due to (1) communication difficulties, (2) long-standing feuds over certain farm lands and fishing rights and (3) the fact that some of them used to be suppliers for different trading states. Since hinterland and coastal languages belong to different language groups, they are, of course, mutually non-intelligible.

'Foreign' languages spoken in this area are the following: (1) Igbo, spoken by seasonally migrant blacksmiths from Awka and by Igbo traders who have settled in the area, especially in Abua; (2) Urhobo and Isoko, from the western Delta, spoken by palm fruit cutters who maintain small camps in the hinterland; (3) Ibibio, spoken by palm wine tappers from the Cross River area who are tolerated in the Delta, but are rated very low on the social scale; (4) Pidgin, used for communication between uneducated speakers of mutually unintelligible languages, e.g., between an Abuan and an Ibibio, if one or both are uneducated; (5) English, on varying levels of proficiency, used between educated persons, often even when they are both native speakers of the same language; it must be remembered, however, that most of these people receive their education elsewhere and rarely return to their home villages permanently until they have reached retirement age. Apart from Igbo and English, none of the foreign languages enumerated here figure in the sociolinguistic phenomena to be discussed.

The former interdependence between coastal and hinterland peoples, as well as recent changes in relationships and attitudes, are reflected in a number of sociolinguistic phenomena. Chief among these are (1) bilingualism, (2) choice of personal names, (3) place names and (4) choice of language in specific situations.

Until recently, a large number of adults — probably a majority — in Abua and Odual spoke Kalabari as a second language. Exact percentages are hard to obtain, especially since past censuses did not elicit information on language. Nevertheless, my informants' responses suggest that the number of bilingual persons was very large. Apparently bilingualism was more prevalent among males, but this is a fairly normal phenomenon in West Africa. In Ogbia, especially the western section, the number of people who spoke Nembe as a second language was, if anything, even higher than the number of bilinguals in Abua and Odual. There is a fairly large number of Kalabari

loanwords in Abua and Odual, while in western Ogbia the number of Nembe loanwords is extremely high, including many items of the basic vocabulary in common everyday use. Such a high loanword count could only be the result of a very high incidence of bilingualism.

While the hinterland peoples spoke Nembe and Kalabari as a second language, no corresponding bilingualism has been reported for the coastal peoples. They do not normally speak Ogbia, Odual or Abua. As a matter of fact, it appears that families of coastal origin living in hinterland villages did not always learn to speak the local vernacular or, at least, did not use it in communicating with their fellow villagers. The term 'non-reciprocal bilingualism' would therefore seem proper in describing the situation. This non-reciprocal bilingualism reflects the fact that the coastal peoples were the politically dominant partners in the symbiotic relationship between coast and hinterland. It may be argued that, while bilingualism was non-reciprocal, the coastal and hinterland peoples did, and still do, sing each other's songs and dance each other's dances, and that, therefore, some measure of reciprocity did exist. However, the borrowing of other groups' song and dance patterns is general practice in the Niger Delta, where an individual may gain prestige by introducing new dances and songs, and where a festival or dance play is valued higher and enjoyed more when musical and choreographic innovations are introduced. Hence, reciprocity in these forms of entertainment in no way diminishes the significance of non-reciprocal bilingualism.

A scrutiny of personal names among the hinterland peoples yields some interesting insights. In fact, the study of child naming practices and of the social, political and psychological motivations of child naming seems to me to be one of the potentially most fruitful areas of sociolinguistic research. However, this is a complex feature of cultural behavior, and it would be unwise to make hasty and sweeping generalizations. Hence, I shall simply present certain data here and claim only that, in this case, at least, child naming practices, along with other factors, may be used as an index of inter-societal relations and trends.

Informants were asked to prepare lists — as exhaustive as possible — of personal names, other than names of European origin, used in their respective communities. Of 63 Abuan names collected, 21 (one third) were of Kalabari origin. 27 (26%) of 103 Odual names were also Kalabari. Of 43 names collected from the eastern Ogbia on Kolo Creek, 10 (23%) were Nembe. In western Ogbia, where coastal influence was greatest and where the incidence of bilingualism was highest, 29 (39.7%) of 73 names were Nembe. Actually, these figures tell only part of the story; what is also needed is data on how many individuals have personal names derived from one or the other language. Such information is difficult to obtain without an actual census. Direct questioning revealed that, in western Ogbia, individuals with Nembe names far outnumbered those with Ogbia names. Significantly, the majority of older generation adults had Nembe names. Names derived from other, non-coastal, languages do occur in some hinterland societies, but the percentages are quite small.

Place names in the hinterland provide additional evidence of the influence of coastal groups. This is less so in Abua, where a number of geographically close villages have now coalesced into the town of Abua and where the number of isolated villages is rather small. It is most evident in western Ogbia, where nearly all of over 40 villages have Nembe names or at least Nembe translations of older Ogbia place names. Most of the Nembe place names are compounds, and one component is often the personal name of a Nembe individual who either helped found the settlement or achieved social and economic prominence there, most probably during the oil trading period. It is important to realize, however, that there are also Ogbia place names for nearly all of these villages, and that the inhabitants use these when speaking in the vernacular. Moreover, there appears to be fairly general agreement that the Nembe place names are innovations. Nevertheless, it is the foreign names which enjoy official administrative recognition and appear on all maps of the area.

Since, at the moment, no particularly strong evidence exists to the effect that the hinterland area was once permanently occupied by people now living on the coast, the existence of coastal language place names in the hinterland cannot be interpreted as the result of such occupation or even migration. Rather, it must be assumed that Nembe and Kalabari place names in the hinterland simply reflect the political dominance of the coastal peoples during the time of the Oil Rivers trade. The fact that these place names frequently contain personal name components would seem to point to the fact that individuals or families from the coast were located in hinterland villages, presumably as agents of the coastal trading states.

In bilingual communities, the choice of a particular language in a given situation or for a given occasion is an interesting research topic, since, in nearly all cases, the preference of language A to language B in a specific context is indicative of the presence of certain non-linguistic, i.e., social or political, factors which trigger this preference. At any rate, such choices are rarely free, and the factors controlling or limiting the choice are of great interest. In the area under discussion language choice in the past further illustrates the relationship between coastal and hinterland peoples. Since, as has already been stated, bilingualism was non-reciprocal between coastal and inland groups, it follows that communication between them was carried on in the coastal language. In fact, the use of the coastal language seems to have been even more wide-spread: there is evidence that it was employed locally in the hinterland at important occasions, such as village gatherings, especially if some of the important speakers or socially prominent participants had coastal origins. Moreover, though Christianity was introduced in this area primarily by European missionary efforts, the first African clergy was nearly always drawn from the coastal peoples. As a result, church services were held in Nembe or Kalabari, and what liturgical literature was available was printed in the coastal language appropriate to the particular area. Many elementary school teachers were people from the coast and taught literacy in Nembe or Kalabari, using primers in these languages. Consequently, many members of today's older generation are literate in one of the coastal languages,

but cannot read or write their own.[2]

There is little doubt that the widespread use of coastal languages in the hinterland contributed to the belief, general among many other Nigerians and among non-Africans, that the Niger Delta is inhabited almost entirely by Ijo-speaking peoples. Thus, Westermann and Bryan list Ogbia as an Ijo dialect; they do not list Abua, Odual or Kugbo.[3]

The sociolinguistic phenomena described in the preceding paragraphs are only partly a matter of the past. What has been said about bilingualism in the population is still true for the older generation, i.e., people of about 45 years of age and older. The percentages of foreign personal names were obtained in 1965-66, and the place names discussed above appear on all the most recent and accurate maps. Nevertheless, in recent years a number of changes have been taking place which have affected and are continuing to affect the sociolinguistic picture of this area. These changes will now be discussed.

In the political and economic spheres the most profound changes were, of course, the cessation of the Oil Rivers trade, the coming of the colonial regime and, most recently, Nigerian independence. In colonial Nigeria, the establishment of Rivers Province kept the hinterland peoples administratively linked to the coastal groups. Nevertheless, perhaps aided by the discontinuance of the economic interdependence with the coast, the hinterland peoples have experienced a general change of attitude. The new attitude may best be summarized as a greater awareness of ethnic identity as distinct from the coastal peoples and a feeling, frequently verbalized, that hinterland communities had been exploited and held down by the coastal trading states and that this situation needs rectifying. In recent years, especially since Nigerian independence, this desire for recognition as separate ethnic entities has increased and has resulted in considerable political agitation, not so much for greater local autonomy as for increased political representation as ethnic units distinct from the coastal groups. The recent partition of Rivers Province into three new provinces has not changed the situation greatly; Odual is still linked to Kalabari, Ogbia to Nembe. Only Abua is now administratively linked to mainland peoples. While the entire eastern Niger Delta is a 'minority area' in relation to areas occupied by Nigeria's major ethnic groups, the hinterland peoples of the Delta are in turn minorities within their provincial boundaries. While all Delta peoples feel threatened by the majority groups whom they accuse of neglecting the economic development of the Delta (an accusation with some basis in fact), the hinterland peoples see themselves threatened by the political power of the numerically superior coastal groups.

On the whole, the hinterland peoples have been frustrated in their desire to translate ethnic self-awareness into political leverage. However, their new orientation has had linguistic repercussions which will now be discussed in the same order as before: bilingualism, personal names, place names and language use.

Change in bilingualism has not so much affected the number of bilinguals as the languages involved. Some of the younger people, i.e.,

those of university age and younger are not bilingual; a majority, however, are bilingual, but their second language is not Nembe or Kalabari. In Abua, for instance, many young people learn Igbo as a second language. This shift reflects (1) the long-standing friendship between Abua and certain Igbo groups, (2) the fact that Abua has permitted and encouraged a permanent Igbo settlement in its principal town and (3) the fact that Abuans who leave home in search of employment increasingly go north to the large Igbo speaking towns of eastern Nigeria. In general, it may be said that younger bilinguals in the hinterland now learn some non-coastal Nigerian language and/or some form of English as second languages. The particular level of English proficiency depends on the amount of formal education that an individual has received. The net result of this new development is, of course, the number of speakers of Nembe or Kalabari as second languages is steadily decreasing in the hinterland areas. Of my seven informants — all of them men under 30 — only one claimed speaking proficiency in a coastal language. Their parents could all speak either Nembe or Kalabari.

In keeping with the general trend there have been changes in child naming practices. Most families now give their children names drawn from the local vernacular. If 'foreign' names are given, they are not usually Nembe or Kalabari. In some parts of this area there has been a very slight increase in the use of Igbo names, but in general the number of individuals with foreign names is steadily decreasing. English 'Christian' names have also been affected by this trend. The shift in child naming practices is a fairly recent development, as may be deduced from the following example. The people called Kugbo live in a group of four small villages, administratively grouped with Odual, but speaking another, though closely related, language. The vast majority of Kugbo people have Kalabari or 'Christian' names introduced by missionaries. My Kugbo informant was able to think of only six native Kugbo names; moreover none of the bearers of these local names is more than 15 years old. It can hardly be regarded as a coincidence that it was less than two decades ago that Kugbo first began to make serious efforts to gain recognition as a separate administrative unit.

It may be argued that the change in bilingualism in the hinterland is due less to particularist or anti-coastal feelings than to the cessation of economic interdependence with the coast. It is difficult, on the other hand, to ascribe such economic motivations to the widespread change in naming practices; these are much better explained in terms of ethnic self-awareness and antagonism towards a formerly dominant ethnic group.

As was stated earlier, the maps of the hinterland area are studded with place names derived from coastal languages. In view of the enormous difficulties that had to be overcome in order to map this area accurately it seems unlikely that any place name changes will be given official sanction in the near future. Nevertheless, a movement is gaining ground in western Ogbia to eliminate all Nembe place names in Ogbia speaking villages and to restore the former Ogbia names, not only in spoken or written reference locally, but officially and on all future maps.

It is quite logical, of course, that the shift in bilingualism, i.e., the fact that the coastal languages are no longer second languages of the younger generation in the hinterland, should result in a general shift in language use. The local vernacular is now generally employed in meetings, in litigation on the local level and at all occasions which require participation of the general public. Moreover, while in former days one of the coastal languages was occasionally the medium of communication with the outside world, Pidgin or English are now used for this purpose, depending on the level of education of the speakers. In recent years, Christian clergy has increasingly been drawn from the local population, with the result that church services and sermons are now heard in the vernacular. A recent trend has been to do the same in elementary education, and the vernacular is now used in the lowest grades. To be sure, teachers are somewhat hampered in this endeavor by the fact that orthography has not been standardized for most of these languages, even though a number of rival make-shift orthographies exist side by side. Hence, the desire for standardization is frequently and insistently voiced. Every one of my informants begged me to devise a practical orthography for his language and to instruct him in the use of it so as to enable him to propagate it in his home area. While it is, of course, unlikely that the hinterland vernaculars will ever become vehicles of literary expression (the combined population of all the hinterland groups discussed here probably does not exceed 150,000), the marked increase in the use of local vernaculars may at least act as a safeguard against early extinction. In their fight for political recognition the hinterland peoples are using language as a weapon and as a symbol of ethnic identity.

To summarize briefly: a number of hinterland groups in the eastern Niger Delta were, during the 19th century, economically interdependent with, and politically somewhat subordinate to, certain coastal peoples of the Oil Rivers trading states. The linguistic concomitants of this relationship were (1) a high incidence of bilingualism in the hinterland, not paralleled by similar bilingualism on the coast; (2) a high incidence of coastal personal and place names in the hinterland; (3) the frequent use of coastal languages in everyday affairs in hinterland communities. In recent years the hinterland peoples have experienced changes in attitude and political orientation. These changes have been in the direction of greater awareness of ethnic identity and a growing desire for political recognition as distinct ethnic units. In other words, the trend has been away from national or even regional unity and towards diversity and particularism. The linguistic correlates of this trend are (1) a shift in bilingualism such that coastal languages no longer function as second languages; (2) great emphasis on the use of local vernacular personal names; (3) an attempt, in some areas, to replace official foreign place names by older local names and (4) a concerted effort to make the local vernacular the principal, if not exclusive, medium of communication.

As a final postscript it may be added that some of the evidence presented here shows that not only bilingualism and language choice, but also place names and child naming practices may be fruitful areas of sociolinguistic research.

NOTES

*. Research on which this paper is based was carried out in Nigeria during the academic year 1965-66, under a grant from the Social Science Research Council. A version of the paper was read during the annual meetings of the African Studies Association, Bloomington, Indiana, in October 1966.

1. In very recent times, the Oil Rivers have once again become Oil Rivers. However, petroleum goes out of the Delta by pipeline, leaving both coastal and hinterland peoples quite unaffected. It is ironic that the people who are literally sitting on top of Nigeria's greatest wealth have so far reaped little benefit from the new 'oil trade'. The entire area is quite underdeveloped, especially in the fields of communications and opportunities for gainful employment. Moreover, it is politically a minority area in the sense that all the groups are relatively small, and hence their political influence is very limited.

2. In 1953 I was sent to Abua to set up an orthography for the local vernacular; as far as I could determine, this was the first official move to teach literacy in the vernacular in this part of the hinterland.

3. D. Westermann and M.A. Bryan, Languages of West Africa, Part II of Handbook of African Languages, London, Oxford University Press, 1952.